

FINDINGS: The State Peace, and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta governing Burma, remains one of the world's worst human rights violators. The SPDC severely restricts religious practice, monitors the activity of all religious organizations, and perpetrates violence against religious leaders and communities, particularly in ethnic minority areas. In the past year, the SPDC has engaged in severe violations of the freedom of religion and belief including: the arrest, mistreatment, and harassment of Buddhist monks who participated in peaceful demonstrations in 2007 or are suspected of anti-government activity; the severe repression and forced relocation of the Rohingya Muslim minority; the banning of independent Protestant "house church" activities; and the abuses, including forced labor, relocations, and destruction of religious sites, against ethnic minority Protestants.

In light of these systematic, egregious and ongoing violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2010 that Burma be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC). The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999.

Religious freedom violations affect every religious group in Burma. Buddhist monks who participated in the 2007 peaceful demonstrations were killed, beaten, arrested, forced to do hard labor in prison, and defrocked. Buddhist monasteries viewed as epicenters of the demonstrations continue to face severe restrictions on religious practice. Monks suspected of anti-government activities have been detained in the past year. Muslims routinely experience strict controls on a wide range of religious activities, as well as government-sponsored societal violence. The Rohingya minority in particular are subject to pervasive discrimination and a relocation program that has produced thousands of refugees in Southeast Asia. In ethnic minority areas, where low-intensity conflict has been waged for decades, the Burmese military forcibly promotes Buddhism and seeks to control the growth of Protestantism by intimidating and harassing adherents. A 2009 law essentially bans independent "house church" religious venues and Protestant religious leaders in Rangoon have been pressured to sign pledges to stop meeting.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: After a policy review in 2009, the Obama administration retained wide-ranging sanctions targeting the SPDC yet also started a “pragmatic dialogue” with senior SPDC leaders and expanded humanitarian aid. Administration officials have said that sanctions will not be lifted without concrete results on concerns such as nonproliferation assistance, free and fair elections, release of political prisoners, and humanitarian aid delivery. In USCIRF’s view, religious freedom improvements and democratization are closely linked in Burma. In addition, the SPDC’s human rights violations are regional security concerns, requiring U.S. leadership and coordination with regional and European allies and the UN. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government use its engagement with the SPDC to ensure a peaceful and complete transition to democracy. Targeted sanctions should remain until the SPDC takes active steps to meet benchmarks established in UN resolutions and U.S. law. The United States should continue to build support for the implementation of targeted sanctions while coordinating the diplomatic actions of regional allies, particularly the democracies of Southeast and South Asia. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Burma can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Burma and by following this link:

<http://www.uscifr.gov/images/ar2010/burma2010.pdf>